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ABSTRACT

This Digest reviews studies that deal with use of newspapers in grades K through 12 and as part of the language arts or general curriculum, as well as other studies that examined specifically journalism student performance in secondary schools and beyond. It concludes that evidence from all these studies is decidedly positive when comparing various measures among those who have taken a course in journalism or worked on student media and those who have not. (RS)

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Journalism Student Performance in Language Arts

by Jack Dvorak

School reform movements during the past 20 years have stimulated programs and tests that link newspaper reading, journalistic study and other media use with widely accepted educational objectives found in elementary, middle school, junior high school, high school and even collegiate language arts curricula.

One recent study (Dvorak, 1998) examines high school student performance on Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and Composition Examinations from 1989 through 1997. Specifically, it analyzes students who have taken an intensive journalistic writing course as preparation for the AP examination and compares their performance with those who have prepared for the same test by taking AP English composition or some other advanced high school English course.

For seven consecutive years, 1991 to 1997, the journalism students passed at a rate higher than that of the AP English Composition students. During the first two years students took tests as part of the program (1989 and 1990), the global pass rate was higher than the journalism pass rate. In only 1989, the first year of the experimental program, was the global pass rate significantly higher than the journalism pass rate.

In a Florida public school district, 17 teachers were trained in Newspaper in Education methods, and their junior high and senior high school students received newspapers from a local daily three times a week for a total of 55 days (Palmer, Fletcher & Shapley, 1994). Standardized tests in vocabulary and reading by Science Research Associates (SRA) were scored by SRA.

The Florida experiment compared three groups from pretest to posttest. Newspapers used as part of the instruction in language arts; newspapers available for students but with no formal instruction; and control groups in which no newspapers were delivered. Both middle- and senior-high students using newspapers improved more on all measures of reading and writing than did students taught with traditional materials (Palmer, Fletcher, & Shapley, 1994).

In another experiment, a program to help at-risk Native Alaskan high school students focused on training high school language arts teachers to teach journalism while also using newspaper production as a component in traditional English classes. Those students in the journalism experimental group showed significant gains over the control group in standardized vocabulary tests and in the writing components that were independently graded by language arts specialists (Morgan & Dvorak, 1994).

While these studies deal with use of newspapers in grades K through 12 and as parts of the language arts or general curriculum, other studies have examined specifically journalism student performance in secondary schools and beyond. Again, the evidence is decidedly positive when comparing various measures among those who have taken a course in journalism or worked on student media and those who have not.

Blinn (1982) has shown comparisons of advanced placement and senior honors composition classes with journalism students of similar ability. In the study involving senior high school students in 12 Ohio schools, data analysis showed that journalism writers made fewer errors in most of the writing skill criteria than did non-journalism students, and they scored significantly higher than non-journalism students in all four criteria selected as measures of information presentation and selection judgment: information omission, opening sentence, editorializing and errors in fact. Also, Blinn found journalism students made significantly fewer errors in word context, spelling, redundancy, punctuation and agreement.

A 1988 study of college freshmen divided them into four groups, according to American College Testing (ACT) English Assessment scores in order to equalize abilities in language arts competencies. Those with high school newspaper or yearbook experience had higher writing scores than did non-publications students in 13 of 16 test

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comparisons. All essays were graded by English professors under the guidance of ACT personnel (Dvorak, 1988).

Another study compared students who had completed one year of college and who had been on the staff of a high school yearbook or newspaper with those who had not been involved with school publications. In 10 of 12 statistical academic comparisons, journalism students earned significantly higher scores than their non-publications counterparts: cumulative freshman college grade point average; first collegiate English course; ACT Composite score; ACT English score; ACT Social Studies score; mean score of the final four high school courses taken prior to the ACT Assessments in English, social studies, mathematics and natural science; final high school English grade; final high school social studies grade; final high school mathematics grade; and final high school natural science grade. ACT Mathematics Assessment was significantly lower among journalism students, and ACT Natural Science Assessment scores were nearly identical between publications and non-publications students (Dvorak, 1989).

In a separate part of the above study, attitudes about general high school language arts experiences were gathered from first-semester college freshmen who had taken journalism as part of their language arts program. They rated journalism as No. 1 in 16 of 29 general language arts competencies; they selected journalism courses as having fulfilled the general language arts competencies better than either standard (required) English or other English elective courses; they selected journalism courses as better fulfilling the following competencies than did either required English or other elective English courses: writing, editing, gathering/use of sources, and affective domain (Dvorak, 1990).

Olson (1992) examined the effect news writing instruction in college freshman English composition had on students' anxiety toward writing and six sub-hypotheses. While he found no statistical differences between the groups of journalism and non-journalism students in composition classes at a private Oklahoma college, he discovered that the journalism group showed greater decrease in anxiety, more improvement in their scores on a standardized English test and more improvement in their scores on the writing exercise.

A study of more than 200 collegians at several universities and colleges examined perceived influences of English composition as preparation for the first news writing course for prospective journalism majors (Olson & Dickson, 1995). Generally, the students did not feel that English composition was especially useful as preparation for their journalism classes, other courses or the world of work. Specifically, students were asked to rate 11 skill areas in which they compared their English composition with their journalistic writing classes.

Nine of 11 skill areas were statistically significant in favor of journalism classes: writing concisely, writing precisely, using correct spelling, using correct grammar, writing clearly, writing meaningfully to an audience, writing in an organized manner, writing with detail, and writing interestingly. In two of the 11 skill areas, differences were statistically different in favor of English composition classes: writing creatively and using your opinions (Olson & Dickson, 1995).

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